Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean (review)

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stantiniana, the ecclesiastical and ritual topography of early fourth-century Rome, Lactantius's pamphleteering, inscriptions and coins, panegyrics delivered at Trier, Rome, and elsewhere, all matter equally (just as all are equally "constructed" and self-interested). Sweeping themes, close reading, shrewd observations, evidentiary eclecticism, and a valiant attempt to retell a familiar tale in the service of fuller understanding make *Remembering Constantine* exemplary historical writing and a worthy cap to Van Dam's new Roman trilogy.

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Ross Shepard Kraemer
Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean
Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Unreliable Witnesses is several things at once. First, it is an intellectual autobiography, progressing from Kraemer's days as a "neophyte graduate student" at Princeton in her early twenties (3) to her present position as a professor at Brown in her early sixties, poised to transmit her legacy to a new generation of scholars (274). Throughout the work, Kraemer balances emphasis on continuities in her views of women and religion in the ancient Mediterranean with careful demarcation of the changes that have resulted from her increased attentiveness to the rhetoricity of ancient texts and their consequent limitations as sources for women's history—a shift encapsulated in the book's title.

Second, *Unreliable Witnesses* is an attempt to recapitulate and reframe the theoretical and methodological issues implicated in the study of religion and gender in antiquity. To this end, Kraemer initially invokes Elizabeth Clark's work as representative of historiographic trends arising from the influence of such poststructuralist theorists as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. The hallmark of the "alternative reading strategies" associated with this approach is the eschewal of appeals to authorial intention, notes Kraemer, who at several points seems to elide the distinction between poststructuralism and its structuralist antecedents, suggesting that for poststructuralists authorial intention is displaced by "structures that are inherent in human thinking but not consciously present (although perceptible to trained observers)" (9). Kraemer observes that, for Clark, the embrace of theory produces pessimism regarding the possibility of reconstructing a history of women, as opposed to a history of social and linguistic constructions of gender. Kraemer herself is not only "cognizant of these discussions," as she asserts, but also apparently influenced by them in some measure: "my more recent work attends far more carefully to the degree to which the rhetorical uses of gender obscure our vision of antiquity." Nonetheless, she is wary of too close an identification with Clark and the poststructuralist company she keeps, pronouncing herself "equally cognizant of the extent to which some, if not much of the 'theory' that Clark invokes, is now on the wane, or even rejected" (11).

Her own interest is not in "postmodernism, 'literary-critical' theory, and Marxist-based 'cultural' theory, among others" but rather in "theory as explanation," Kraemer clarifies, without elaborating her objections to other kinds of theory. In this case, what she hopes to explain is "the relationships between [women's] behaviors and beliefs and ancient constructions of gender" (11). Taking hints from Pierre Bourdieu, she understands gender to be socially and culturally constructed (15) and religion to be "both gendered and gendering, constructing and inscribing gender on human beings and human actions and ideas" (263). Religious behaviors and beliefs most typically enforce "proper" gender roles, but they can also be turned to transgressive ends. "Practices cannot have aims and intentions or purposes, which require agents," she stresses (265), without, however, entering into the theoretical debates over agency engaged by Bourdieu, among others. Kraemer also notes suggestively that aspects of religious practice tend to complicate conventional constructions of gender by privileging such feminine or feminizing acts as petitionary prayer, submissive postures, and erotically dependent or passive positions vis-à-vis the divine (265).

Beyond autobiography and theory, Kraemer's book is finally (and in my view most significantly and successfully) a collection of well-chosen case studies illustrating the various challenges attending the construction of a history of women and religion in the ancient Mediterranean. Following the introduction, an initial chapter offers four "short stories" from Livy, the *Acts of Thomas*, the Mishnah, and Justin Martyr that collectively illustrate Kraemer's basic thesis: ancient texts that *seem* to offer reliable evidence of women's religious practices are *in fact* shaped by "gendered concerns" that render such evidence anything but reliable (54). Subsequent chapters focus in more depth on the Therapeutrides (Philo's *On the Contemplative Life*), Thecla of Iconium (*Acts of Thecla*), Artemisia of Minorca (Severus's *Letter on the Conversion of the Jews*), and the "synagogue leader" Veturia of Rome and "proselyte" Rufina of Smyrna (figures known from burial inscriptions). In each case, Kraemer reengages histories of scholarly debate, ultimately questioning the usefulness of these sources for knowledge of women in Jewish or Christian ascetic communities, or as converts from Judaism to Christianity or vice versa. At the same time, she points us toward what we *can* learn from such texts. Philo's utopian community of male and female ascetics may be a strictly literary invention, based on sources both philosophical and scriptural, but his fiction is not entirely implausible and is at the very least valuable in conveying gendered ideals. Thecla may have been the product of a male rather than a female literary imagination, yet her story still demonstrates the existence of alternative roles available to the women who would have heard and interpreted it. Severus's representation of the Minorcan Jews supposedly converted to Christianity in the fifth century may not provide evidence of the boldness and independence of late ancient Jewish women, but it does reveal how a Christian writer could manipulate gender rhetorically to the advantage of his own community. Finally, epigraphical evidence may not yield the dramatically revisionist historical results once hoped for, yet it still suggests that women were benefactors and office holders in synagogues, for example, and also that this was apparently considered unremarkable.

For the most part, Kraemer's conclusions are not startling, but they are almost always sensible, clarifying, and persuasive. She brings decades of study and thought to all of the texts that she here interprets, and readers, whether students or scholars, will profit from this depth of knowledge. The book should not, however, be mistaken for a summative state of the field of the study of gender and religion in antiquity. Rather, it is a particular scholar's accounting of an intellectual journey that has coincided with and greatly contributed to the emergence and maturing of that field, claiming neither neutrality nor comprehensiveness in its treatment of other scholarship. Kraemer's narrative likely will provoke similar retrospective reflection on the part of some of her readers; more importantly, it may allow feminist historians more effectively to engage the question of where we go from here.

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